



REDEEMING  
OUR THINKING  
ABOUT HISTORY

*A God-Centered Approach*

VERN S.  
POYTHRESS

“Vern Poythress has written carefully about how a proper Christian doctrine of providence should (and should not) shape a believer’s understanding of human history. His book is particularly welcome in showing that ‘history’ includes a wide range of possibilities and that most of them can contribute (though in different ways) to Christian study of the past.”

**Mark Noll**, author, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*

“Can we think Christianly about history in its two senses of the events of the past and the written account of those events? Vern Poythress affirms that we can. He seeks guidance from the Bible about how the past should be understood by believers and about how Christian historians should undertake their vocation. He places God at the center of both.”

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“*Redeeming Our Thinking about History* continues Vern Poythress’s penetrating analysis of various fields of human intellectual endeavor. In continuity with his previous volumes, Poythress writes on why history is important and how best to read history—whether biblical or secular—in a God-honoring fashion. While capable of stratospheric thinking and communication, the author in this delightful volume simply takes the reader by the hand and leads him or her to the innumerable problems and issues of historical analysis, then resolves those vast and complicated topics. This approach taps into Poythress’s decades of examining and interpreting the Bible and presents very clear paths for readers to follow. Those insights are combined with practical principles to help us understand events in our own lives. Highly recommended.”

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“With a lucid brevity that Calvin might envy, Poythress covers a broad array of relevant topics in his treatment of redeeming our thinking about history. He strikes just the right balance between common grace and the antithesis as it applies to meanings, events, and people, arguing against all reductionistic approaches (such as Marxism or logical positivism) and covering matters as widespread as the unity, diversity, and uniqueness of the Bible; providence; and the limits of our understanding. He demonstrates the inescapability of a religious stance in writing history and urges that it be done from a truly biblical perspective, arguing for a multiperspectival approach that will yield the richest and most textured historical account—one that acknowledges God’s providence while remembering our creaturely limits in discerning the meaning of his superintendence of history.”

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*Redeeming Our Thinking about History*

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# Redeeming Our Thinking about History

*A God-Centered Approach*

Vern S. Poythress

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*To my wife, Diane*





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# The Importance of History

IS HISTORY IMPORTANT? Should it be important to Christians? What is a Christian view of history? And how should Christians study and write about history? We want to explore these questions.

## The Rejection of History

Some strands in modern Western culture want to forget about history. One strand of the culture says that the new is always better. So, allegedly, we have nothing to learn from the past. Is that right?

It is true that new technologies and gadgets may be better than the old ones. But that does not mean that human nature is getting better. Are our hearts any purer than those of the previous generation? Are we more righteous than the people who lived in the Roman Empire? Are we free from greed, selfishness, lust, envy, and pride? To think that we are in every way better *people* than in the past is a sign of arrogance.

In addition, new gadgets or trends will not satisfy the deepest desires of human hearts. If, as the Bible indicates, the deepest need of humanity is for fellowship with God, the craving for the newest things within the world will never give ultimate satisfaction.

A second strand of Western culture urges us to ignore the past because we deserve instant gratification. We become impatient with the learning process. In our impatience, we refuse to pay attention to history or to study it. We think that our desires of the moment are enough

to guide us in decisions. But this urge for instant gratification is a sign of immaturity. It is childish. It is sinful. We have this urge because we, like human beings before us, are sinners. The urge is strong because many people have become mature in their bodies but remain childish in their hearts and desires. Their parents never disciplined them properly, or they rejected that discipline.

Children want things *now*. But if they do not mature, their childish foolishness leads to disaster.

One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil,  
but a fool is reckless and careless. (Prov. 14:16)

Desire without knowledge is not good,  
and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way. (Prov. 19:2)

We cannot trust these impulses of modern Western culture. Who can we trust? We need to see what the Bible says about history. The Bible is the word of God,<sup>1</sup> so it gives us judgments that are faithful for all time. What does the Bible say about history and the knowledge of the past?

### **God's Commands concerning the Past: Old Testament**

God says that history is important, and it should therefore be important to us. In the Bible, God commands his people to pay attention to what happened in the past. He tells us to remember the past, to learn from it, and to tell the next generations about it:

Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you *forget* the things that your eyes have seen, and lest *they depart* from your heart all the days of your life. *Make them known to your children and your children's children*—how on the day that you stood before the LORD

1 See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010); and Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948).

your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, “Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach *their children* so.” And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain. (Deut. 4:9–11)

When you father *children and children’s children*, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, so as to provoke him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. (Deut. 4:25–26)

To you it [the deeds of the exodus] was shown, that you might *know* that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. (Deut. 4:35)

The larger context in Deuteronomy 1–5 reinforces these verses by its repeated emphasis on what God did in the past to bring the Israelites to the place where they now are. It contains a summary of much history; in chapter 5 in particular, it includes a remembrance of the time when God gave the Ten Commandments.

Deuteronomy 6 commands the people of God to remember and especially to teach their children:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall *teach them diligently to your children*. (Deut. 6:6–7)

Take care lest you forget the LORD, *who brought you out* of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut. 6:12)

You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, *as you tested* him at Massah. (Deut. 6:16)

When *your son* asks you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?” then *you shall say to your son*, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.” (Deut. 6:20–25)

The theme continues in the next chapters of Deuteronomy:

You shall not be afraid of them but you shall *remember* what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. (Deut. 7:18)

And you shall *remember* the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness. (Deut. 8:2)

Psalm 78 (like some of the other psalms of remembrance) also commands the people to remember and learn from history:

We will not hide them *from their children*,  
 but tell to the *coming generation*  
 the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,  
 and the wonders that he has done.  
 He established a testimony in Jacob  
 and appointed a law in Israel,  
 which he commanded our fathers  
 to *teach to their children*,  
 that the next generation might know them,

the children yet unborn,  
and arise and tell them to their children. (Ps. 78:4–6)

### God's Commands concerning the Past: New Testament

We see a continuation of this concern for the past in the New Testament. The New Testament often presupposes that we already know about what God did in former times in the Old Testament. It concentrates on telling us what God has done more recently, in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The four Gospels are books of history, the history of the life of Christ. The gospel, the good news of Christ, which is at the heart of the New Testament, is about history. Here is a crucial summary of the gospel:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor. 15:1–8)

The gospel is not focused on personal psychology—words or techniques to make us feel good. It does not primarily come to us in the form of a manual for living or a series of guiding questions for better understanding ourselves. It is not focused on religious ritual. Benefits of various kinds do come to those who have received reconciliation with God. But the gospel, the good news, announces events that happened in the past, in the death and resurrection of Christ. It is about events, events in *history*. To believe the gospel means to hear about and then



believe things about events in history. Specifically, we have to believe that God raised Christ from the dead. God calls us to trust in Christ because of what he accomplished. God commands us to repent and believe the gospel (Mark 1:15; Acts 17:30–31). By implication, God commands us to pay attention to history. History is indispensable in the Bible and in the Christian faith.

The New Testament affirms the divine authority of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17–20; John 10:35; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:21). But it also affirms that the Old Testament continues to be *relevant*, rather than saying that we can ignore it as if it were simply the “dead past.” The relevance is seen in the widespread New Testament quotations from the Old Testament and in specific affirmations of its continuing relevance (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Pet. 1:19). The apostle Paul appeals to the history of the exodus and points out that it includes examples for us:

Now *these things took place* as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. (1 Cor. 10:6)

Now *these things happened to them* as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Cor. 10:11)

Hebrews 11 instructs us by appealing to the heroes of the faith, who are part of the historical record in the Old Testament. Hebrews 3–4 indicates that we should learn from the events that occurred when Israel was in the wilderness. Paul exhorts Timothy to read the Old Testament publicly (1 Tim. 4:13) and apply himself to studying it (2 Tim. 3:15). These affirmations about the Old Testament as a whole obviously include the historical records in the Old Testament.

### **Instruction in History**

The New Testament, like the Old Testament, affirms the importance of instructing children in the Christian faith: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and

*instruction of the Lord*” (Eph. 6:4). This includes instruction in the Old Testament. God’s commandments to parents in the Old Testament continue to be commandments for us in the New Testament era of the history of redemption. When we are united to Christ by faith, we are incorporated into the stream of the history of the people of God. We become heirs to the promises made by God in the Old Testament (2 Cor. 1:20). Christ is an Israelite, of the line of David (Matt. 1:1–16). When we are in Christ, we become part of the spiritual people of God. First Corinthians 10:1, addressed to a church with Gentiles as well as Jews, speaks of the people of Israel as “our fathers.” Spiritually speaking, the Israelites have become *our* ancestors, and the Old Testament patriarchs are *our* patriarchs, our spiritual fathers. We stand in a line of historical continuity with them. Their history is part of *our* history.

In sum, we must pay attention to God’s deeds in history. And we teach our children to do it. We do it because God commands us to do it. If we are enlightened by the Holy Spirit, we do it also because of inward motivation from the Spirit. We see that the record of God’s works is good for our souls.

Why is it good for our souls? We may not know all the reasons why. Through the Holy Spirit, God works to transform us in ways that are deeper than what we see. The Holy Spirit uses the Bible in this transforming work (John 17:17).

Though there is mystery in the work of the Holy Spirit, we can observe at least *some* of the ways in which the history of God’s deeds empowers us to grow spiritually.

### **Ways in Which History Serves Christian Growth**

First, reading history in the Bible expands our view of God. He is not a God who entered the scene of history yesterday. He has been working for ages and ages. He is the everlasting God (Ps. 90:1–2). He was faithful to individuals and generations before us (Pss. 105; 106; 107; 145). He is wise beyond imagining. His power is displayed in creation and in his miracles. His wisdom and truthfulness are displayed in the consistency of his plan for redemption as he works from age to age.

Second, reading history in the Bible expands our view of Christ and his redemption. God gives us pictures of redemption in the Old Testament. These are anticipations and foreshadowings of the climactic redemption that comes in Christ. These anticipations include acts of redemption in history. God saved Noah and his family from the flood (Gen. 6–8). Through Joseph, God saved his people from famine (Gen. 50:20). Through Moses, God brought the people out of Egypt. These acts of God in history foreshadowed the great act of God, when he sent Christ into the world. Christ redeemed us from sin, death, and the power of Satan. The Old Testament records deepen our appreciation for who Christ is and the meaning of what he has done.

Third, reading the Bible expands our view of humanity. God’s record in the Bible shows humanity both in acts of righteousness and acts of wickedness, in integrity and sin, in courage and cowardice, in wisdom and foolishness, in faithfulness and treachery, in purity and impurity, in kindness and cruelty, in help and oppression, in life and death. The history in the Bible shows us a variety of personalities and cultures, united by the reality of a common humanity. We are all made in the image of God; we are all fallen and in need of redemption.

Each of us is unique, but all of us can see analogies between our lives and the record of what others did. We can learn about ourselves and also about others. We acquire wisdom.

Proverbs says that wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Ps. 111:10). Wisdom grows as we pay attention to the instruction of God himself, and then the instruction of those who were wise before us. But it can also grow through paying attention to life. Proverbs itself invites us to look at examples in life (see, for example, 7:6–27).

History gives us innumerable cases to study, which enable us to explore human nature. We learn about human nature and about ourselves as human beings. We may ask, “What would happen if human beings were to make a crucial decision to go to war or to surrender, to travel or to stay in one place, to lay up resources for the future or to consume them now or give them away?” We learn by seeing what happened as a result of this or that decision recorded in the historical

records of the Bible. We learn what it means to obey God or disobey, to do our duty or neglect it, to act with integrity or selfishness, to live life wisely or foolishly.

Finally, reading the history in the Bible leads to praising God and glorifying him. This praise of God is the goal of human existence. Knowledge of history contributes, because if this knowledge is healthy, it increases our love for God and our praise of him. We see God working. We see his wisdom, power, kindness, justice, compassion, and mercy—we see all his attributes. To understand God rightly also leads to growth in our love for him. We praise him specifically when we learn about specific ways in which he has worked in the events of history.

History, then, is important and vital. It is vital because God says it is. We can also *see* that it is vital when we see some of the benefits of studying it.

### **History outside the Bible**

So far, we have been focusing on the history recorded in the Bible. That is what God is talking about when he commands us to remember what he did and to teach our children. In his wisdom, God has given us a collection of many events about which the Bible tells us. Though the Bible talks about many events, it does not mention explicitly all the details about the whole history of the world. In the Bible, God gives us what we need, but not everything about which we might be curious.

So what about other events that are not recorded in the Bible? Could we study them as well? They do not have the same central place in God's instruction that the Bible itself occupies. But we can see that some of the principles that apply to records in the Bible also apply, by analogy, to events outside the Bible.

To begin with, God rules *all* of history, all events whatsoever, not just the events recorded in the Bible. So his wisdom, power, goodness, kindness, and other attributes are displayed in all things that occur. We can praise God for his work in making the most distant galaxies, even though we did not know about them until they were found in the twentieth century. Likewise, we can praise God for his governance of

the history of France, the history of Ecuador, and everything that we find out about in modern history books.

History *outside* the Bible can serve us in ways similar to those we observed above. We can grow in knowing the God who rules history. We can grow in appreciating the depth and breadth of Christ's redemption. We can expand our view of humanity. We can grow in our self-understanding by comparing ourselves with people from the past. We can expand our praise.

But when we deal with history outside the Bible, there are also cautions. The historians who study and write about this history are fallible people. So we have to sift what they write.

Let us then consider more thoroughly the challenge of studying history and writing about it. Let us consider this challenge particularly in the context of sin. Sin has contaminated human work since the fall of Adam. And this contamination extends to academic work, including the work of studying history. What do we need in order to study history, and in what ways do we need caution because of sin?

PART 1

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WHAT WE NEED IN ORDER  
TO ANALYZE HISTORY

*Essential Resources That God Supplies*



## Experiencing History

WHAT IS HISTORY? How should we write about it? How should we read about it and experience it? These are significant questions. How should we respond?

### **The Challenge of God and of Christ the Lord**

Christ is Lord of all of life,<sup>1</sup> including how we think about and deal with history. Historians everywhere are obligated to submit to his universal rule (Eph. 1:20–22; see Acts 17:30–31). So it is worthwhile trying to think about a Christian view of history and how we write about it.<sup>2</sup>

Above all, a Christian view takes into account who God is. He is the single most important one to take into account. God rules history. Moreover, he has a plan for history, a plan that encompasses its overall shape and all the details (Isa. 46:9–11). In the Bible, God shows us the outworking of his plan for the whole of history. The first act takes place when God creates the world (Gen. 1). He also creates mankind (1:26–30), but mankind falls into sin (Gen. 3). The rest of the Bible focuses primarily on God’s works of redemption, which rescue us from

1 Vern S. Poythress, *The Lordship of Christ: Serving Our Savior All of the Time, in All of Life, with All of Our Heart* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

2 Diane M. Poythress, “Historiography: Redeeming History,” in *Redeeming the Life of the Mind: Essays in Honor of Vern Poythress*, ed. John M. Frame, Wayne Grudem, and John J. Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 312–28. Dr. Poythress anticipates the need for “a book-length treatment” (p. 321), which this book is intended to supply.